

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

AN ADDRESS

BY

FRANK S. BLACK

Before the
Republican Club of New York City,
February 12, 1903.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
State of Indiana through the Indiana State Library



HERE are subjects upon which nothing new can be said, but which still arouse the fervor awakened at their first enunciation. If the song was true when it started on its journey it will be sung as long as human hearts vibrate and tongues retain the gift of speech. It will be lisped by those who are tottering on toward the end, and echoed by those whose hearts are filled with the promise and the glow of youth. If the product was genuine when it passed from the Creator's hand it will neither be dimmed by age nor cheapened by familiarity: for honor is not decreased by contact and truth is never out of tune.

If none of the old stories are ever to be re-told, many a noble inspiration must be lost, and many a tender chord must remain untouched.

This is the age, I know, when the search is at its height for the new and marvelous, and in this eagerness the primeval forests are swept away, the bowels of the earth are punctured, and even on the remotest sea the observant eye detects the flutter of a sail. The watchword is energy, the goal is success, but in the fever of modern enterprise a moment's rest can do no harm. We must not only acquire, we must retain. We must not only learn, we must remember. The newest is not always the best. The date or lustre of the coin does not determine its metal. The substance may be plain and unobtrusive, and still be gold. Whoever chooses without a proper test may die both a

pauper and a fool. The paintings of recent times have evoked the praise of critics, and yet thousands still pay their homage to an older genius. Modern literature is ablaze with beauty and with power, and yet millions are still going to one old and thumbworn text for their final consolation.

Remembering the force of these examples, it will be profitable sometimes to step one side for the serious contemplation of rugged, lasting qualities in whatever age or garb they have appeared. The hero of an hour will pass as quickly as he came. The flashlight will dazzle and blind, but when the eyes are rubbed the impression has passed away, but the landscape that comes slowly into view with the rising sun, growing more resplendent and distinct with his ascending power, and fading gently from the vision at the approach of night, will remain in the mind forever to illuminate, to strengthen and to cheer. And men are like impressions. There are more examples of the flashlight kind than there are fireflies on a summer's night, but there is no nobler representative of the enduring and immortal than he in whose name this event is celebrated. Whoever imparts a new view of his character must tell it to the newborn, to whom all things are new, for to the intelligent and mature his name and virtues have been long familiar. His was the power that commanded admiration and the humanity that invited love; mild but inflexible, just but merciful, great but simple, he possessed a head that com-

manded men and a heart that attracted babes. His conscience was strong enough to bear continual use. It was not alone for public occasions nor great emergencies. It was never a capital, but always a chart. It was never his servant, to be dismissed at will, but his companion to be always at his side. It was with him, but never behind him, for he knew that a pursuing conscience is an accuser, and not a guide, and brings remorse instead of comfort.

He wore the crown of power with justice, reason and mercy, and faced defeat with humility and courage.

His greatness did not depend upon his title, for greatness was his when the title was bestowed. He leaned upon no fiction of nobility, and kissed no hand to obtain his rank, but the stamp of nobility and power which he wore was conferred upon him in that log hut in Kentucky, that day in 1809, when he and Nancy Hanks were first seen there together, and it was conferred by a power which, unlike earthly potentates, never confers a title without a character that will adorn it. When we understand the tremendous advantages of a humble birth, when we realize that the privations of youth are the pillars of strength to maturer years, then we shall cease to wonder that out of such obscure surroundings as watched the coming of Abraham Lincoln should spring the colossal and supreme figure of modern history.

Groves are better than temples, fields are better than gorgeous carpetings, rail fences are better than lines

of kneeling slaves, and the winds are better than music if you are raising heroes and founding governments.

Those who understand these things and have felt the heart of nature beat will not wonder that this man could stand the shock and fury of war, and yet maintain that calm serenity which enabled him to hear above the roar of the storm that enveloped him, the low, smothered cry that demanded the freedom of a race.

If you look for attributes that dazzle and bewilder you must seek them elsewhere than in the character of Abraham Lincoln. It was not by show or glitter or by sound that the great moments of history were marked and the great deeds of mankind were wrought. The color counts for nothing; it is the fibre alone that lasts. The precept will be forgotten unless the deed is remembered. The wildest strains of martial music will pass away on the wind, while the grim and deadly courage of the soldier, moving and acting without a word, will mark the spot where pilgrims of every race will linger and worship forever.

No character in the world more clearly saw the worth of substance and the mockery of show, and no career ever set in such everlasting light the doctrine, that although vanity and pretense may flourish for a day, there can be no lasting triumph not founded on the truth.

The life of Lincoln moved upon that high, consistent plane which the surroundings of his youth inspired. Poverty is a hard but oftentimes a loving nurse. If

fortune denies the luxuries of wealth, she makes generous compensation in that greater love which they alone can know who have faced privations together. The child may shiver in the fury of the blast which no maternal tenderness can shield him from, but he may feel a helpless tear drop upon his cheek which will keep him warm till the snows of time have covered his hair. It is not wealth that counts in the making of the world, but character. And character is best formed amid those surroundings where every waking hour is filled with struggle, where no flag of truce is ever sent, and only darkness stays the conflict. Give me the hut that is small enough, the poverty that is deep enough, the love that is great enough, and I will raise from them the best there is in human character.

This lad, uncouth and poor, without aid or accidental circumstance, rising as steadily as the sun, marked a path across the sky so luminous and clear that there is not one to mate it to be discovered in the heavens, and throughout its whole majestic length there is no spot or blemish in it.

The love of justice and fair play, and that respect for order and the law, which must underlie every nation that would long endure, were deeply embedded in his nature. These I know are qualities destitute of show and whose names are never set to music, but unless there is in the people's heart a deep sense of their everlasting value, that people will neither command respect in times of their prosperity nor sympathy in

the hour of their decay. These are the qualities that stand the test when hurricanes sweep by. These are the joints of oak that ride the storm and when the clouds have melted and the waves are still, move on serenely in their course. Times will come when nothing but the best can save us. Without warning and without cause, out of a clear and smiling sky may descend the bolt that will scatter the weaker qualities to the winds. We have seen that bolt descend. There is danger at such a time. The hurricane will pass like the rushing of the sea. Then is the time to determine whether governments can stand amid such perilous surroundings. The American character has been often proved superior to any test. No danger can be so great and no calamity so sudden as to throw it off its guard. This great strength in times of trial, and this self-restraint in times of wild excitement have been attained by years of training, precept and experience. Justice has so often emerged triumphant from obstacles which seemed to chain her limbs and make the righteous path impossible, that there is now rooted in the American heart, the faith that no matter how dark the night, there will somehow break through at the appointed hour, a light which shall reveal to eager eyes the upright forms of Justice and the law, still moving hand in hand, still supreme over chaos and despair, the image and the substance of the world's sublime reliance.

I should not try, if all the time were mine, to present Lincoln as an orator, a lawyer, a statesman or a politi-

cian. His name and his performances in the lines which he pursued have been cut into the rock of American history with the deepest chisel yet made use of on this continent.

But it is not by the grandeur of his powers that he has most appealed to me, but rather by those softer, homelier traits that bring him down to a closer and more affectionate view.

The mountain that crowds its summit to the clouds is never so magnificent to the observer on the plain below, as when by some clear and kindly light its smaller outlines are revealed.

And Lincoln was never more imposing that when the milder attributes of his nature were exposed. He was genuine; he was affectionate; and after all is said and the end is reached, what is there without these two? You may measure the heights and sound the depths; you may gain the great rewards of power and renown; you may quiver under the electric current of applause—the time will come when these will fall from you like the rags that cover your body. The robes of power and the husks of pretense will alike be stripped away, and you must stand at the end as you stood at the beginning, revealed. Under such a test Abraham Lincoln might stand erect, for no man loved the humbler, nobler traits more earnestly than he. Whatever he pretended to be, he was; genuine and sincere, he did not need embellishment. There is nothing in the world which needs so little decoration or which can so well

afford to spurn it altogether as the absolutely genuine. Imitations are likely to be exposed unless carefully ornamented. Too much embellishment generally covers a blemish in the construction. It therefore happens that the first rate invariably rejects adornment and the second rate invariably puts it on. The difference between the two can be discovered at short range, and safety from exposure lies only in imperfect examination. If the vision is clear and the inspection careful, there is no chance for the sham ever to be taken for the genuine, and that is why it happens that among all the forms of activity in this very active age, no struggle is more sharp than that of the first rate to be found out and of the second not to be. It is easier to conceal what a thing is than to prove it to be what it is not. One requires only concealment, the other demonstration. Sooner or later the truth will appear. Some time the decorations will fall off, and then the blemish will appear greater because of the surprise at finding it.

None have less to fear from such a test than Abraham Lincoln, and his strength in that regard arose, it seems to me, from the preservation through all his life of that fondness for his early home, of the tender recollections of his family and their struggles, which kept his sympathy always warm and young. He was never so great but that the ties of his youth still bound him. He was never so far away but that he could still hear the note of the evening bird in the groves of his nativity.

They say the tides of the ocean ebb and flow by a force which, though remote, always retains its power. And so with this man, whether he rose or fell; whether he stood in that giant-like repose that distinguished him among his fellow men, or exercised those unequalled powers, which, to my mind, made him the foremost figure of the world, yet he always felt the tender and invisible chord that chained him to his native rock. In whatever field he stood he felt the benign and sobering influences of his early recollections. They were the rock to which he clung in storms, the anchor which kept his head to the wind, the balm which sustained him in defeat and ennobled him in the hour of triumph.

I shall not say he had his faults, for is there any hope that man will pass through this vale of tears without them? Is there any danger that his fellow-men will fail to detect and proclaim them? He was not small in anything. He was carved in deep lines, like all heroic figures, for dangerous altitudes and great purposes. And as we move away from him, and years and events pass between us, his form will still be visible and distinct, for such characters built upon courage and faith, and that affection which is the seed of both, are not the playthings, but the masters of time.

How long the names of men will last no human foresight can discover, but I believe that even against the havoc and confusion in which so many names go down, the fame of Lincoln will stand as immovable and as long as the pyramids against the rustle of the Egyptian winds.

